The Fiction Magazine Section

SYNDICATE MINE

THANKSGIVIN'S Thursday, come a week," announced Stumpy Routh, as he looked up from a week-old old newspaper.

"Fat lot w'ye got to be thankful or," growled Bounce Gillen, as he picked up the two cards which the dealer slipped him and found a tray and deuce instead of the seven and the jack he needed to fill the straight.

"That's right, chimed in Dutch Pete, as he mournfully surveyed the big room of what had once been the Palace faro parlors. "If we was all to put it together there wouldn't be enough for one man to be thankful for."

"Sort of Thanksgivin' syndicate?" said Routh. "That's not a bad idea."

"You couldn't get it with a syndicate," was the surly response from the barkeeper. "Last year Turkey Creek was a new Goldfields. Why, right here in this room I've seen $20,000 change hands in a night. The week Denver Charley left he took in $17.50."

"You can't kick at that," reminded Routh. "When he gave up the game you came in for this elegant structure for almost nothin'."

The barkeeper surveyed the big room in disgust. From the ceiling hung a dozen swinging lamps while others decorated the brackets along the sides.

Time was when they had all been burning. Now one bracket had been lighted that Routh might read his paper. Another burned over the table where were gathered most of those who were left in the camp, watching a poker game.

The feeble illumination only seemed to accentuate the darkness of the far corners and to increase Pete's melancholy.

In the days when the placer gold was supposed to indicate the existence of rich deposits five barkeepers had been employed. He had been one of them and to him his employer had given the place when the camp had been deserted by most of the fortune hunters.

The place barely supported Pete alone and the once crowded gambling rooms now served as a sort of clubroom for the few remaining optimists.

Routh laid down the paper and grinned at Pete's expression.

"Them was fine old times back home," he said reminiscently. "I remember the turkey and the cranberries and the pumpkin pies and the minces and the chicken pie and——"

"Shut up," commanded Gillen. "Where are you going to get your mince pies in this forsaken hole?"

"Wouldn't you like one?" teased Routh, dodging the empty bottle Gillen flung at him. "Honest now, I mean it! What's the matter with a Thanksgiving syndicate?"

"And where'll you get your pies and things and who'll cook 'em?" demanded Gillen. "We won't be thankful if you do the cookin'."

"The 'lunger's' wife," explained Routh. "She told me a while back she was from New England. Bet she can make 'em."

Gillen nodded. Julian Gordon, ordered West in the hope that a life in the open might save him from the white plague was one of the first to make Turkey Creek. He still held on in the hope that some change might come.

In any event he could not move, for the little gold he and his brave little wife could wash from the stream barely paid for the flour and bacon and the few other necessaries.

"Guess she could do it," asserted Gillen. "What do you say, boys? Let's come in on Routh's syndicate and have a Thanksgiving, even if we ain't got nothin' to be thankful for exceptin' a good dinner."

"That's something to be thankful for," reminded Routh, to whom the simplest cookery was an unattainable accomplishment. "We've got 10 days to make ready in. It takes two days to go to town and three to come back. That leaves five full days. Come on, I'll go and see the lunger's wife, and if she says she'll do it I'll come back and pass the hat."

Routh stepped bravely out into the rain. The Gordon cabin was at the far end of the gulch; no pleasant walk in the chill November shower, but he whistled as he strode along.

It was years since he had enjoyed a real Thanksgiving dinner. Somehow it seemed to bring back a sense of nearness to home even to think of a proper celebration.

His enthusiasm gave eloquence to his arguments, and presently he was plodding back with Mrs. Gordon's promise.

"It's all right," he announced as he shook off the wet and came into the room. "Mis' Gordon says she'll do the cooking and be glad to. I've got a list of what she wants. Produce."

For example he threw down his own pouch of gold and into the buckskin bag the others shook a portion of their scanty store.

"What's left goes to the lunger, so don't be backward," urged Routh, cheerfully, as the bag was passed around and he smiled as he felt its growing weight.

The whole camp turned to give him a send-off the following morning and Pete loaned his pack mule in case Routh's could not carry the load. On the return trip the trail would be all up hill and the list was a heavy one.

Once past the turn Routh was seen no more and the rest went back to their dreary routine of washing gold from the gravel of the stream.

When the deposit had been discovered it had been argued from the richness of the find that a mother lode must be close by, but the stream had been explored to its source with no result. Still hope burned eternal and while the men got out just enough to keep their supplies up they spent the rest of the time in prospecting for the lode, beating over ground that had been tried a hundred times before.

It was late on the sixth day when Routh reappeared. Pete was the first to discover him and his shout of surprise brought the others tumbling out of the shanty.

In the patch of light from the open door sat Routh and beside him was a girl just budding into womanhood; a frail delicate figure in clothes of a cut that proclaimed the East.

"It's Mis' Gordon's sister," he explained to the crowd. "I found her down to Grass Valley tryin' to find where Turtle Creek was, so I brought her along. You fellows unload them mulesa and give 'em feed while we go on."

He had vanished into the darkness as he spoke and the others turned their attention to the two pack animals. The packs were heavy indeed and as they were carried into the palace many were the conjectures as to what was what.

Pete had donated the use of the stove that in more prosperous days had served to cook the meals that were served the patrons of the palace. It was the only range in camp and now the supplies were stored in the deserted cabin and the men sat back to await the return of Routh.

The had a long wait, for it was three hours before he returned and rather shamefacedly entered the palace.

"I was making arrangements for the dinner," he explained. "You see they didn't expect Miss Hardy and it kinder upset Mis' Gordon."

"Looks like it upset some some others we know," Gillen suggested with a laugh.

For a moment it looked as though there might be trouble, but it ended in Routh's joining good naturedly in the laugh and then news of the outside world replaced the gossip of nearer home.

The next morning a plume of smoke over the palace announced that preparations for the dinner had commenced. Routh constituted himself man-of-all-work, and hung devotedly about the doorway of the kitchen, where Mrs. Gordon and her sister worked away until, at Mrs. Gordon's command, he took his gun and went in search of game.

The turkey he had been able to purchase was not more than large enough to give each man a slice, and this, Mrs. Gordon declared, must be supplemented by game, since beef and mutton were out of the question.

For two days the popping of Routh's gun could be heard in the side gulches and the string of birds and rabbits grew apace. Then Routh transferred his attention to the kitchen again and feasted his nostrils upon the savory odors of mince and pumpkin pies, while he brought in the wood and helped pare and prepare.

The whole camp had become vitally interested in the dinner and as they sat in the big gambling room over their nightly poker they discussed the probable menu.

The dinner was set for 2 o'clock on Thanksgiving day, but the guests began to assemble shortly after 9. Every man had made some attempt to dress up, but none reached the hights attained by Routh, who was resplendent in a white shirt, paper collar and flaming red tie.

He stood on guard at the door of the gambling room, which was to be the banquet hall, and no amount of persuasion could induce him to let any of the curious have even a peep at the joys within.

Now and then a current of air would bring to the hungry an appetizing odor of roasting turkey, but not even a glimpse of the place did they have until Mrs. Gordon, her face beaming with good humor, threw open the doors and invited them to enter.

The first men to enter stood stock still until pushed on by those behind. Some of the old tables had been scrubbed to snowy whiteness and along the sides were ranged rude benches. As the leading mover of the syndicate, Routh had the post of honor at the head of the table, Nell Hardy on his left and Mrs. Gordon on his right when the two women could be induced to sit down between the courses. At the head of the table smoked the turkey and at intervals down the board were other roasts of game.

Heaping dishes of vegetables stood guard beside the meats and the center of the table was made gay with evergreens and paper roses. Reverently they stood while Mrs. Gordon pronounced a simple grace, then Routh rapped on the table with his knife.

"The thanksgiving of the thankless is ready to commence," he announced. "All sit."

With elaborate ceremony the turkey was carved so skillfully that each man was served a tiny slice of white and dark meat and then supplementing the service with the side dishes the feast began.

But even more sucessful than the turkey was the pie, a generous cut of peace and pumpkin to each man, with a cube of cheese atop of each, and Pete, moved to generosity, brought out a box of cigars with the coffee.

"I got some things to tell you, fellows," announced Routh as he struggled to his feet. "I ain't much of a hand on speeches, but here goes.

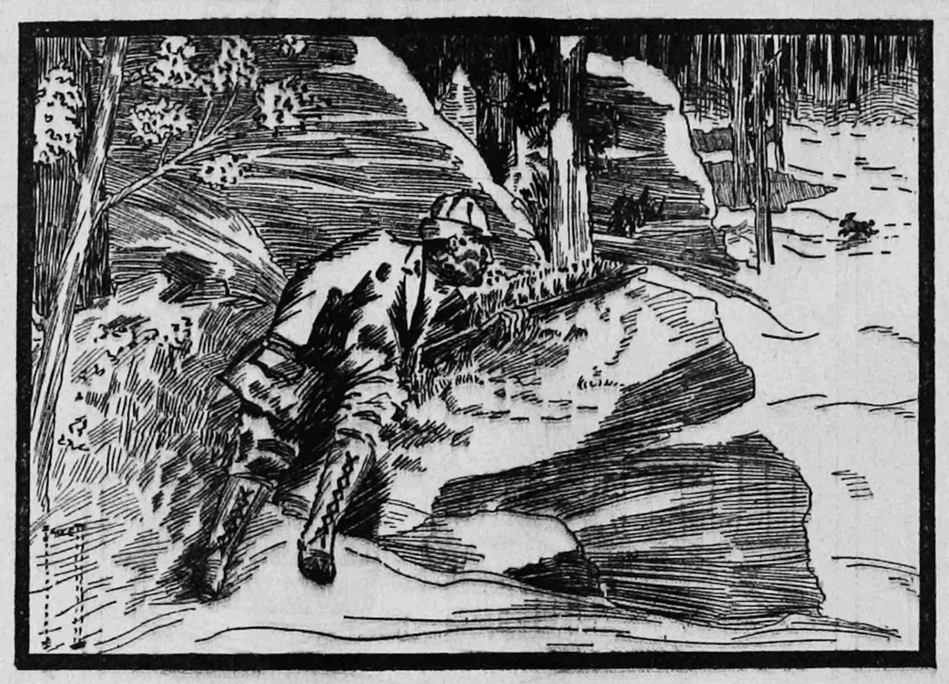
"This syndicate of the Thankless was a big idea and it would have spolled if we had all been thankful for anything but a good dinner. But now that it's over, I want to tell you that you've got a lot more to be thankful for than you realize.

"To begin with, we've all been a pack of fools trying to trace the placer gold to the mother lode. We all went up stream because that's where the gold comes from. We plumb forgot about freshets in the spring. The gold's all in Little Turtle gulch, and there's enough there to make us all wealthy. I got a claim staked out, and so's Miss Hardy and the Gordons, but there's enough for all, and I propose that this syndicate be turned into the Thanksgiving Mine Syndicate. All in favor say 'aye.'"

For a moment the men sat stunned. It had never occurred to them that the gold might have been washed down in the spring floods. It was but natural that they should look along the watercourse and they had all ignored the smaller gulch until Routh had invaded the place in search of the game that had been driven there from the larger valley.

Routh's last words seemed to bring home to them a realization of the belated luck and the "ayes" thundered forth as the question was put.

"We'll stake off the claims tomorrow," completed Routh, "and then I'll go to Grass Valley and have a lawyer draw up the papers that will make this syndicate a permanent thing," he went on, "if Pete will bring out the bottle, I want you all to drink to the future of Mrs. Routh. Miss Hardy says she'll marry me and alongside of Nell Hardy, I'll tell you boys, a mine an't a patch of a thing to be thankful for—not even the Thanksgiving Syndicate Mine."



ROUTH'S GUN COULD BE HEARD IN THE GULCHES.

MEETING MR. RANDALL

ON ROUTE, L, P. R. R.

"Dearest Mabel:

"After a three months' merry-go-round of balls, opera and the like, your provincial little cousin is returning to pastures green and her home on the hillside. I met many men, but did not meet my fate, as you predicted that I would do. They were all very nice men, but so much alike.

"Three of them came to the train to see me off. Each sent me a box of red roses, a box of candy and a novel. The roses were alike and from the same florist's, the candy of the same brand and from the same confectioner's, the books bore the same title.

"I sent you my programs of the operas and plays and my dance cards, so you know about what I have been doing. There is nothing else to tell—maybe there will be. I may meet my fate right on my own doorstep. I think not, however, because I am awfully tired of him already.

"To be sure I haven't seen him yet, but his name has crept into every line of every page of every sheet of every letter I have had from home.

"He is 'the Celery King.' He really has another name, but if they ever mentioned it I have forgotten it. He is called that by everyone. He bought all that lowland for miles around our farm and is growing celery. Last summer he built an ideal rambling farmhouse near our farm, but he only came there to live the day after I went to visit Aunt Janet. He has made a big success and he and his celery are really famous.

HE SAID, "I BEG PARDON, AREN'T YOU MISS ROBYNE?"

"They are very chummy with him at home. He is over there every day or evening and seems to have made himself one of the family. Papa writes fluently of his manly qualities; mamma of his charming manners, disposition and kind heart; while little brother and sister laud his generous bestowals of rides and bon bons.

"I am really bored to death by descriptions of him and his belongings. Doubtless he is in the same condition regarding me, for you know they are all over-given to dissertations of the undersigned and mamma writes so often: 'We have told him all about you.'

"It seems he has an understudy living with him, a young man from the East who is learning the tricks and manners of celery plants. They have written very little about him, however. I feel that I shall much prefer him to the Celery King.

"I will finish this letter tonight at my own hearthstone, and then I can tell you all about him, for in mamma's last letter she said that our one and only driving horse has gone lame, and that the Celery King and the understudy had both volunteered to come to the station for me.

"They drew cuts to see which would come and the Celery King was the lucky—or unlucky—man. The understudy had laughed and said that he was quite a diplomat himself and that it might happen that he would see me first, after all.

"We are slowing up at Lexington and I just saw the handsomest man going into the ticket office. Maybe he will get on this train! More anon.

"April 16, Bedtime (?).

"There was much more and quite anon, too. The handsome man came into the car and made straight for me. He said: 'I beg your pardon, but aren't you Miss Robyne?'

"'Yes,' I replied, and then before I knew it I thought out loud, 'And you must be the understudy to the Celery King.'

"I wish you could have seen the dancing of his expressive eyes. He sat down beside me and said: 'Of course, I would know you, Miss Robyne, for I knew you were to be on this train and I have seen photographs of you many times, but how did you know who I am?'

"Then I told him what mamma had written about their drawing cuts. 'So,' I concluded, 'I presume you came down on the morning train to outwit The Celery King.'

"'No,' he replied slowly, 'I didn't care about outwitting him; I came to see you.'

"'Now that you have seen me, you might introduce yourself. You were simply mentioned as "the young man learning the celery business," so I dubbed you "The Understudy."'

"'Pardon me; my name is Owen. And were they as reticent regarding The Celery King?'

"'No,' I groaned. 'They have grown so absurdly interested in him—though I don't know his name—"Randall" supplied the understudy—and have written of him until I must confess I grew tired of reading their letters. You were scarcely mentioned, which is in your favor.'

"'I believe I like the appellation of "The Understudy,"' he mused. 'You see, an understudy has nothing to do but commit the part, and then stand around and wait for an opportunity to play the role.'

"'Yes,' I replied, 'and did you ever notice that when the understudy gets a chance he makes a bigger hit than the star?'

"'I hope so,' he murmured in fond, impressive tone, 'that it will prove true in this case.'

"I was really sorry when we reached the next station, for I knew the next stop would bring us to our journey's end, and there would be that prig of a Celery King.

"You know I am confidential sometimes and I told Mr. Owen what I was thinking, and asked him if we couldn't shake the 'star.' He said that would be hardly right, for, after all, Mr. Randall had been fair in the matter.

"We stopped so long at the station that Mr. Owen got off to see what was the delay. He came back and said a freight train had broken down a few miles ahead, and that it would be three hours before we could go on. So he telegraphed papa, and we had a cozy little dinner at a restaurant, walked about town and before I knew it those three lovely hours had slipped by.

"'I wonder if the Celery King is waiting all this time,' I said as the train drew up at our station.

"'I know I would be,' he made answer.

"'There he is!' I exclaimed as we got out, and I saw a touring car with a slight, brown-looking man at the wheel.

"'No; that isn't Randall; it is his chauffeur,' said Mr. Owen, going up to the man. He came back to me with shining eyes. 'Randall couldn't come. He sent his man for you, though.'

"So we had a lovely six-mile drive before us. I asked him to come over

MRS. ROBYNE.

tonight, but he said he owned it to Randall to let him come.

"Mamma, papa and I talked our heads off—at least, I did. They did not get much chance.

"'It was too bad,' mourned mamma, 'that Mr. Randall couldn't come, but it was nice in him to send for you. His man stopped here on the way to the train, after we got the message.'

"I didn't tell her about Mr. Owen then. I was afraid she wouldn't like it. I was unpacking in the evening when she came into my room.

"'Mr. Randall is downstairs, Lou. I am not dressed, and your father is at the barn. Go down and introduce yourself. We are so informal with him.'

"I went down and there sat Mr. Owen.

"'O,' I said, joyfully, 'it's you. Mamma said "Mr. Randall."'

"'I am Mr. Randall—Mr. Owen Randall—' he said gravely.

"'Not—the celery king!" I stammered faintly.

"'Yes. Won't you wait, please, until I explain. I was so anxious to meet you (I didn't get bored by hearing of you) that I went to Lexington to ride back with you. Before I had an opportunity to explain who I was, you confessed to a prejudice to me, and you seemed to like me tolerably well in the role of someone else, so I didn't venture to 'fess up until I had won a little favor. Won't you forgive me—please?'

"I didn't like the deception a bit, and I was awfully ashamed, remembering all I had said, but I heard mamma coming—and—well, I said—'You know I told you understudies always made a hit.'

"And, well, it's late. I musn't write any more tonight. As ever,

"Your Own Lou."

FINDING A SISTER

PERHAPS there will be some stateroom given up?" suggested Dora hopefully.

"Occasionally someone decides to wait over a boat, don't they?"

The clerk smiled down into the eager face.

"I am sorry," he said gently. "I can offer you little hope. The only reservation that is not yet taken up for this boat is for Mr. Jennings. The rest have come in and Mr. Jennings wrote that he would be here today. You see the end of the season finds everyone wanting to go home at the same time. The boats come up loaded and go back overloaded."

"These tickets are good overland?" asked Dora hopefully.

"No. The trip by train costs $28 more. We will make an exchange if you like."

Dora shook her head. She could not confess that she did not have any money left. She had meant to be saving, but there were so many pretty things to buy. They cost a trifle more than she could afford, and there were so many people to buy for that she felt that she could not slight that her purse was perilously close to emptiness. As it was, she would have to eat crackers instead of regular meals.

With all berths sold and a long waiting list, Dora felt there was small chance, and she looked enviously at the list the clerk had shown her with each reservation neatly checked off. Only the Stephen Jennings was unchecked, and as Dora turned to go an idea flashed into her mind.

There was a park opposite the steamship office and she took a shady bench to wait until the clerk who had attended her had gone to lunch. Then she boldly entered the office again, and another clerk came to wait upon her.

"I want the reservation made for Mr. Stephen Jennings," she said boldly. "He is my brother and the reservation was made for me."

Unquestioningly the clerk handed over the room check, and with a fast-beating heart Dora hurried from the place. It seemed a terrible thing to do, but her need was desperate and she breathed a little prayer that Mr. Jennings might be able to afford the extra fare required by the land trip.

When the ship swung out of the harbor that evening Dora breathed more freely. She had feared that perhaps the real owner of the stateroom would come to claim his property, and she had sat on the deck starting at the sound of every passing footfall.

Someone took the chair beside her and Dora frowned. It was the man who had given her his turn the setime she had gone to the steamer office.

"Miss Jennings, I believe?" he asked courteously as he raised his cap.

"No, I am not," snapped Dora.

"I beg your pardon," was the smiling reply. "I heard you ask for Jennings' stateroom and heard you say that you were his sister. I never met his sister, but as I knew Steve very well I wanted to ask her if I could be of service."

"You can't," snapped Dora, impolitely. "I suppose you mean well, but I am not Mr. Jennings' sister and——"

"And you stole his stateroom," suggested the stranger.

"How dare you say that?" stormed Dora.

"It's all right," was the quiet response. "I had it doped out. When you said that you were Miss Jennings and I knew there was no Miss Jennings I figured it out that you had heard of the reservation in some way and had taken it up. I think I can guess the rest. Money all gone, no chance for a room and you must get back. Am I right?"

"It was a horrid thing to do," she admitted. "It was like stealing, but I had to do something. I could not pay another week's board, and I didn't have the price of the railroad fare. So I waited until the clerk who told me about the reservation went to lunch and got it from the other clerk. Do you suppose that it will make it hard for Mr. Jennings?"

"It won't bother him in the least," assured the man. "If it had promised to I should have interfered. It was funny to stand there and see you walk off with the ticket under my very nose."

"It's not a bit funny," reproved Dora. "I don't see anything to laugh at. It was wicked and I'm sorry I had to do it, but I was desperate. My money was all gone. I shall have to live on crackers until I get back because I cannot afford to eat in the cabin."

"You are a plucky little girl," declared the stranger. "Don't you worry. Jennings is all right."

He saw that Dora wanted to cry and with an inutition almost feminine he slipped away to let her have her cry out. He was back before the signal was given for dinner.

"You slip down to the cabin and bathe your eyes," he commanded. "You are not going to live on crackers for the next two days. You are going to be my guest."

"I am not in the habit of letting strange persons take me to dinner," said Dora with a flash of her old spirit.

"My dear child," said the man gently, "I am not offering you charity. I have a perfect right to take my sister down to dinner if I want to. I am Jennings, you know. I managed to get half a room with a man I know. Doesn't it make a difference?"

"I guess it does," assented Dora as she smiled through her tears into the grave, earnest eyes. "It's heaping coals of fire on my head, though."

"Not in the least," declared Jennings. "I lose a stateroom and find—a sister. The advantage is all mine."